

PHOTOGRAPHY

Holi

India's Festival of Colors

Journalist and Author Raymond Nadeau meets up with photographer, Steven Burton, sharing the pageantry, splendor and bodacious beauty of India's joyous and notorious Festival of Color.

While there is certainly much to lament these days, from failed economies to social unrest to global warming, it's easy to forget that there are still places and moments filled with celebration and color. Children still play pranks on their friends and elders squealing in innocent delight. Passions are proven to not always be destructive. And, color, in all its splendor still distracts from otherwise grey realities transforming the mundane into something sublime.

Steven Burton, a New York City based photographer, captured just such a vivid reprieve from the ordinary on his recent trip to India where he chronicled India's annual Holi festival. Holi - the festival of colors - the jubilant, strangely magnificent festival, steeped in multiple traditions and somehow lost in time. Holi is an amalgam of music, dance, religious devotion, ritual and, most of all, one of the world's few tributes to the uplifting, often underappreciated glory of color. What visual artists and even some alternative medical and healing traditions have always recognized is that color is and forever will be directly connected to hearts and, if you ask the subjects of the following photos, perhaps even directly to the soul.

Like this visual essay, Steven is a colorful, yet thoughtful person. He sees both the surface and beneath the surface - somehow fusing both the visible with a sensitive understanding and integration of the colorful strata that lie deeper toward the core. A celebrated, professional model, his "image" is easily recognizable - yet his life is private. Perhaps it is because he has been the face reflected in so many photographs





that he is particularly sensitive to the fact that what one sees is not always a complete reflection of the emotional complexity of what is. Steven has a knack for seeing and experiencing what is. He sees beyond color. He sees beyond masks.

No doubt, Burton's study of graphic design at Blackpool and Fylde College in Blackpool, England and his having worked with some of the world's greatest photographers such as Bruce Webber, Richard Phibs, Patrick Demarchelier and Stewart Shinning has contributed to this ability to see beneath the surface – propelled by Burton's natural humanity, warmth and, of course, talent as a photographer. The fact that he lives as an ex-pat in New York City, the melting pots of melting pots, a place where even the most colorful person often goes unnoticed, may also be partially accountable for his ability to see what and where no one else ever bothers to look, let alone see. Thus, Steven seems to have mastered the ability to capture his subjects willingly off-guard, accepting of his momentary intrusion and even welcoming of his visual intimacy.

Although Burton has lived, worked and traveled around the world, what truly differentiates his photography is his ability to see the world with an unflinching, unwavering sense of awe and unique understanding that the

real beauty of the world always prevails and is best expressed in the faces of human beings – even when it's shrouded in vividly, brilliantly, colored clouds of smoke.

Holi, or the festival of colors as it is also known, is undoubtedly the most joyous and boisterous of Hindu festivals. It's a photographic opportunity extraordinary with its public exhibitions of unadulterated mirth, fun and play, music and dance – and the momentary suspension of reserve which during other times of year might constitute a barrier between a photographer and his or her subject. I assumed this was brought Steven to India. I was wrong. It seems he has a thing for water fights. I asked Burton about the festival and his experience and this is what he had to say:

“As a kid, I loved water fights. Like most children, I always felt invincible. Water pistols, buckets, hoses anything capable of projecting water – these seem to hold universal appeal for children hell bent on wreaking havoc and getting themselves and their friends, siblings and anyone else unlucky enough to be in their vicinity soaking wet. I was just your average brat, a little mischievous - and I grew up in the UK which, in a way, made it a little ironic – my love for pelting my friends in water despite the fact we lived in a place where there was constant rain. So when I heard about the largest water and powder throwing



celebration in the world, called - The Holi festival in India – It was a no-brainer. I had to go.”

While to me, this all sounded very nostalgic and good reason to take a vacation, I had to wonder why this festival in particular, held the promise of a great photo essay. So, I asked Steven, apart from the “water antics” what made the Holi festival visually significant – truly worth capturing?”

Burton responded, “While Holi is holy – the synonyms should not be confused. Holi is a cultural and a religious event – it also is a visual reenactment of many of the on-going, archetypal themes that cross virtually every culture. The Holi festival reenacts multiple elements of Hindu lore – extracting symbolism from multiple stories. Holi is played out all over India and comes under many names, and mythologies – but the common message is to celebrate the coming of summer and the triumph of good over evil – all with as much fun as possible.”

“The festival dates back at least several centuries before Christ, and was originally known as “Holika”; it was a special rite celebrated by married women for the happiness and well being of their families. While much of that tradition and other reflections of that transition remain, it has evolved into a festival that celebrates and commemorates many things – not the least of which is the joy of life and the diversity of human beings – and love.”

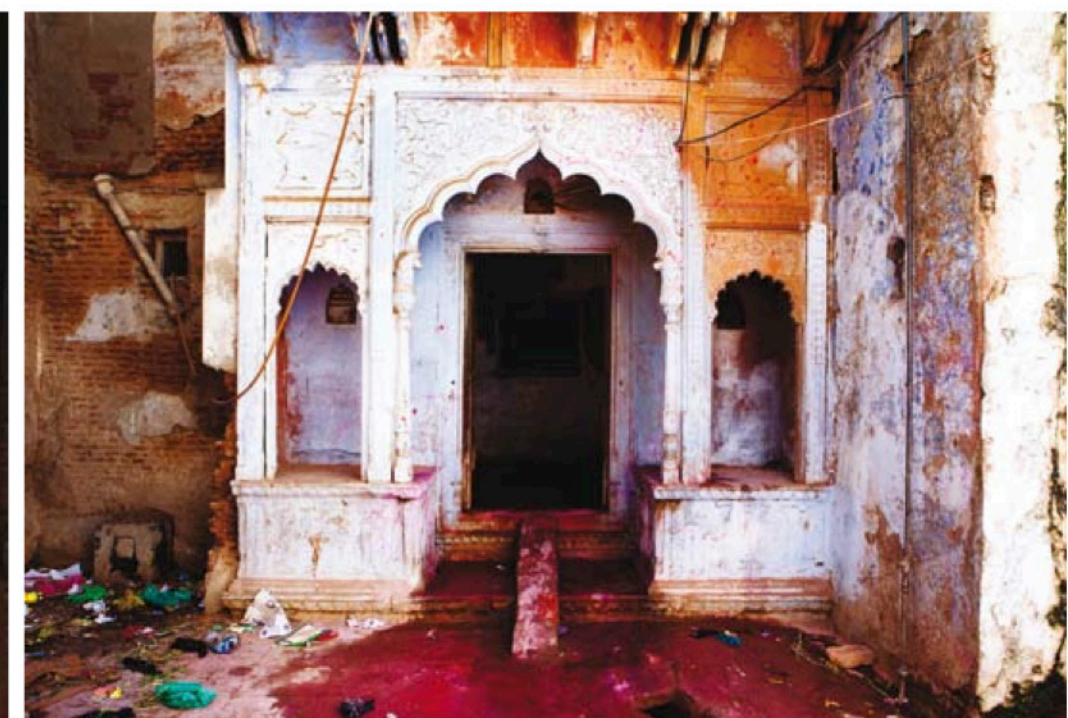
When asked to describe his journey, Burton recounted, “My Destinations were the small towns of Mathura and Varindavan - the stomping ground of the young mischievous Lord Krishna, where the origins of the throwing of color originated.”

“The story goes that the young Lord Krishna was jealous of the fair complexion of his soul mate Radhas, complaining to his mother Yashoda that he had dark skin and that nature had been unfair. To placate her son, Yashoda told young Krishna he could apply a color of his choice to Radhas face; this solution pleased the mischievous Krishna, explaining why the tradition has become a full fledged festival.”

Further recounting his journey, Burton continues, “I arrived in Mathura which is a small town 141km south of New Delhi passing many statues of Holika with the son of Hiranyakashap – Prahlad on her lap - along side wood ready to be burnt at the auspicious time during that night’s festivities. This is the day of Holika Dahan. The story goes that a demon king called Hiranyakashyap believed himself to be a god and decreed that only he could be worshiped; when his son Prahlad began following Lord Vishnu, in rage, the king asked his sister, Holika to enter a burning fire with his son on her lap.

“While Holika had the power to enter fire unscathed, she was unaware that her protection from the flames only worked when she entered alone. Prahlad was saved due to his extreme devotion to Lord Vishnu and Holika perished – thus coming to symbolize evil. This evening of bonfires happens the day before the day of colors and symbolizes the success of good over evil.”

“I left my hotel late afternoon prior to the evening of bonfires and walked to the train tracks where the burning of one of the deity pyres was to take place at 10.15pm. As the time arrived and the local crowd surrounded the statue, a middle aged man with a fashionably bushy Indian mustache struck a match and



threw it on the wood – which must have been loaded with gasoline due to the explosion that followed; everyone was rocked back a few feet, eyebrows and mustaches were singed, followed by big smiles and cheers. Then the man with the matches reached into the fire, grabbed Prahlad from the grasp of Holika and ran down the street triumphantly screaming! I had witnessed a “miracle” and it was now time to get some sleep.”

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“I woke with a crazy sense of peace, an almost surreal calm - a quiet-before-the storm sort of feeling. It was a cool morning as I stepped out upon the streets headed for Varindavan, 10 km from Mathura, where the Holi games were to be played – with reputed unparalleled verve. There were not many people on the streets and for a minute I had a horrible feeling that I had missed the festival! If it was not for the solo, dark-blue colored bicyclist, dotted with bright random splashes of red - riding by me at that moment, I might have been worried. Apparently, the games were still on. I had been silly to worry. The games have been on for over two millennium.”

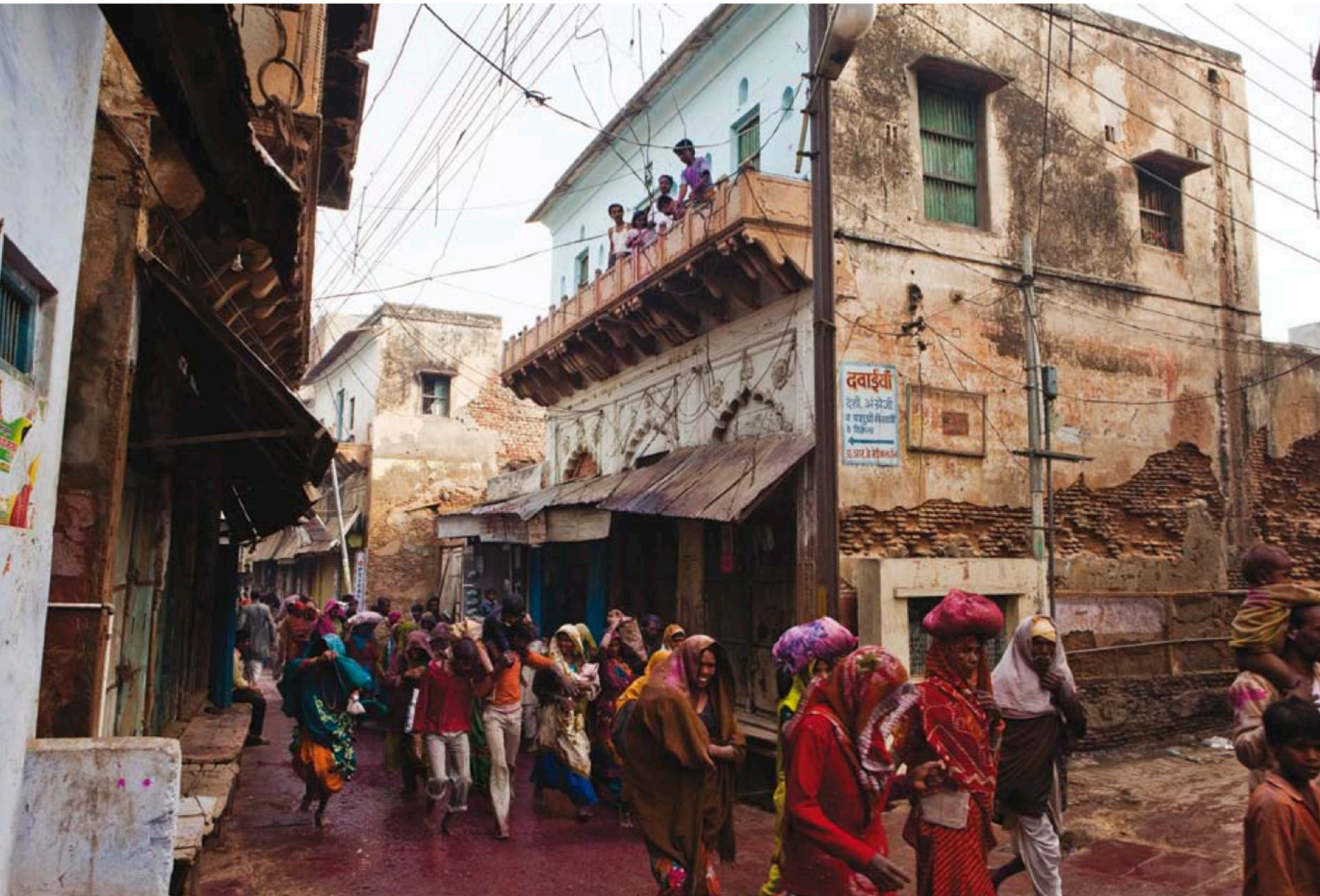
“I then shared a Tuck - Tuck on my way to Varindavan. A Tuck-Tuck is an Indian taxi comparable to a three-wheeled motorcycle. Covering the 10km ride to Varindavan; I dangled out the back of the filled-to-capacity three-wheeler, my camera wrapped in bags to protect it from the water and powder I knew awaited. Hat-on-my-head, my spirits up - and my nerves somehow dealing with the jarring bumps in the road, I was on my way to Varindavan.”

“Varindavan was the legendary playground of Lord Krishna, a place where he ran rampant and apparently had a great time playing pranks and benevolently inflicting mischief on the villagers. There are many temples, both old and new that attract pilgrims from all over the world – particularly those dedicated to Lord Krishna.

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“The next thing I remember is pink dust exploding on the older women next to me followed by shouting and laughter. I disembarked and my face was instantly “branded” with the imprint of the red, wet hands of a young giggling boy, who seemed very pleased to have tinted the face of a fresh-faced tourist in a color that was a cross between apples and oranges. My assailant shouted, ‘Bura na mano Holi ha’ the Holi chant which translates: ‘Please don’t take any offence for it is Holi.’ With that, he ran off only to be replaced by others of his “polite”, fun-loving friends. By this time I did manage to retrieve my camera out of its wrapper, which seemed to transform my friendly Holi hooligans into preening peacocks – prompting them to assume “pose” mode – scamps quickly transformed into aspiring super models.

“Thus was the intensity of Holi - non-stop until 2pm when the festival comes to an end. The atmosphere continued its electric pace, filled with positive energy. Proud fathers looked upon their sons and daughters as they dumped full buckets of colored water from balconies on unsuspecting priests below. Groups of men sing Bollywood-inspired Holi numbers fired by the holiday drink Thadai laced with Bhang which produces exactly that, a powerful bang, completing the surreal scene.



“I ducked down a side street looking for some portraits to shoot away from the crowd, the streets in Varindavan are very narrow like all ancient towns with beautiful old buildings that have balconies and plenty of monkeys ready to snatch anything that is not tied down – spectacles seemed to be there preference. These particular monkeys looked down at the festivities with nonchalance.

“The Temple is where the true water/ powder fight takes place; depending upon the sizes of the temples, hundreds of people cram into these gloriously-carved ancient buildings. Singing and dancing the air is thick with powder and water is flying - very intense; I am 6’1 and on this day was glad my head rose over the average reveler. It all felt a little like a joyous car wash – people entered one way and came out the other transformed – maybe not cleaner, but shiny and new none-the-less. .

“There was one safe haven; the place where food was served, maybe made more poignant given the sour-looking guard who sat on an elevated chair armed with a shot gun - facing the diners. I sat, ate, re- charged and sampled the sweets that are associated with holi, gujiya, mathri, malpuas – great ways to restore much needed energy.

“I loved the pure good will in Varindavan, I had read that there are places in India where things could get out of hand – especially when alcohol is involved. But Varindavan demonstrated none of that. In fact, I would characterize it is as having had almost a manic family-like atmosphere.

“When 2pm arrived it was like someone had turned of a tap! Shop keepers came out with hoses. The colored empty streets were suddenly the only reminders of the events that were now just hours old. Still more pink powder drifted peacefully down on the still, morning air.

“I walked happily in the direction of the main road dreaming of a shower, my bed and also wondering if I might luck upon a nice cold beer. The main road was about a mile’s walk and the sun was already high and hot. I had survived the biggest water/powder fight I had ever seen. My photos survive to tell the tale.

“As I rounded the corner, in the distance, I watched a man on a bike being covered with blue water by a group of 12 kids. Suddenly, the boys came running towards me. They must have seen me dragging my feet in their direction. Their eyes lit with youthful glee, gazing towards me. Seconds later, 12 little Krishnas huddled around me. Not again. Holi Holy. Krishna, please – not again.”



Steven Burton’s work can be viewed at
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More of Raymond Nadeau’s work can be found at
www.livingbrandslivingmedia.com.